

# THE POLITICS OF ARISTOTLE

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## To *ergon tou anthropou*<sup>1</sup>

“Ἐκάστων ἐστὶν, ὧν ἐστὶν ἔργον, ἕνεκα τοῦ ἔργου.”

Aristotle, *De caelo* II.3, 286a8–9

**ABSTRACT:** *The article offers an interpretation of the so-called ergon argument in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics I.7. I argue that the argument offers a good ground for interpreting human happiness as theória and that the argumentation is coherent with the rest of the Nicomachean Ethics as well. The article provides answers to three widespread critiques of the ergon argument. I claim that the ergon argument covers both the moral and intellectual virtues, further I offer a possible interpretation of the difference between theória of human beings and theória belonging to gods. Finally, I try to explain in what sense a good of human being is good for a human being at the same time.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ergon* argument, Aristotle, ethics, Nicomachean Ethics, gods, happiness, *theória*

### 1. ARISTOTLE ON THE *ERGON* OF MAN

Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces a more substantial account of happiness by an argument concerning to *ergon tou anthropou*, i.e., the work or function of man.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars dislike this argument and consider it either falla-

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<sup>2</sup> From the numerous literature on this argument I found the following texts relevant to my project: Clark (1972), Wilkes (1980), Korsgaard (1986), Hutchinson (1986), Whiting (1988), Kraut (1989): chap. 6, Broadie (1991): chap. 1, Brüllmann (2011): chap. 3, and Brüllmann (2012).

cious or useless.<sup>3</sup> My aim in the following paper is to examine the argument and defend it from three possible objections found in modern commentaries.

After going through the possible *endoxa* concerning *eudaimonia* as the highest good (*NE* I.3–4), Aristotle provides us with several formal characteristics of *eudaimonia*. We do not know yet what *eudaimonia* consists in or what kind of life one ought to live in order to be happy and good, but whatever it could be, *eudaimonia* as the final goal of every doing and deliberation (*praxeî kai proairesei to telos*, 1097a21, cf. a23) will have the following characteristics: it will be complete (*teleion*, 1097a25) in the sense of being a final good that is not demanded for anything else but for itself (*auta kai di' auto airetôn*, 1097a32–4). Further, it will be self-sufficient (*autarkes*, 1097b6–11), so that one does not need anything else but this end. Therefore, “happiness is clearly something complete and self-sufficient, being the end of our practical undertakings” (1097b21–22, transl. Rowe).<sup>4</sup>

According to Aristotle this is a plain truth and he wants to provide a clearer or more distinct (*energesteron*) account of *eudaimonia*. What is *energesteron* is better known and somewhat more easily recognisable for us than its counterpart (cf. *Anal. Prior.* 68b36, *Magna Mor.* 1187a30). Therefore, the following account should make more lucid what *eudaimonia* is and what it consists in. The best way to clarify the concept of *eudaimonia* is to consider the *ergon* of human beings (1098a24–25).

The term *ergon* is usually translated as “function” (Irwin, Rowe, Ross/Brown) or “characteristic activity” (Crisp).<sup>5</sup> None of these alternatives is completely appealing to me, for – as will be clear from what follows – *ergon* does not have to be an activity and it is not a function in the most common meaning of the term. Another possible translation might be “product,”<sup>6</sup> however, this term is not fully adequate either since it suggests certain separation between the product and producer (e.g. between us as individual human beings and our own *ergon*). The human *ergon* is much closer or even intimate to us than any product we otherwise produce. The *Greek-English Lexicon* by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott offers translations like “work,” “deed,” or “matter.” On the other hand, Aristotle’s usage of the term corresponds to the third meaning of “function” in *Oxford English Dictionary*: “the special kind of activity proper to anything; the mode of action by which it fulfills its purpose.” This meaning seems so Aristotelian that I will

<sup>3</sup> For the list of complaints see Achtenberg (1989. 37).

<sup>4</sup> See Curzer (1990) on the criteria for happiness.

<sup>5</sup> Kenny (1992. 144–5) leaves the term untranslated throughout his translation of this chapter. The most common translation as “function” is sometimes unfortunate since it may mislead the reader into thinking that *ergon* is merely a predominant activity (cf. Barney 2008. 314–315); *ergon* can be understood as “task” or “deed” as well, since it sometimes refers to the object done and not the activity of doing, cf. the argument in the *Eudemian Ethics* II.1.

<sup>6</sup> Suggested to me by Gábor Betegh.

use “function” when it is inappropriate to keep the transliteration of the Greek term.<sup>7</sup>

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle leaves the term without closer specification or definition, but his following reasoning tells us enough to determine what he has in mind. *Ergon* comes complementing *praxis* (doing), and according to Aristotle, *ergon* rather than *praxis* is the seat of the good. Aristotle reasons further:

Is it the case that there are some doings and functions for a carpenter or a shoemaker, but not for a human being, who is born without anything to do (ἀργός)? Or just as an eye, hand and foot or any of the bodily parts seem to have a function, similarly there could be given some function for a human being alongside with these? What would it be? (1097b30–33)

Aristotle does not present the argument that a human being has an *ergon* in a logical form; the above quoted passage is not a case of valid induction nor it is an argument from analogy. The examples are too few to make a valid induction, and they are clearly picked only from two categories (*technai* or occupations, and *merei*, bodily parts), further, there is no clear analogy between the examples and a human being.<sup>8</sup>

The text is quite persuasive despite the lack of rigid argumentation. Its force lies exactly in the nature of the two categories of examples indicated as entities having their products. There are two uncontroversial truths in the text: different occupations have their *erga* and bodily parts have their *erga* as well. Therefore, a human being is composed of parts, each part having its *ergon* in relation to the complex whole, i.e., to the human being.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, any occupation, or social and family status one holds has its *ergon* as well. I am composed of functional elements, and since I am, for example, a son, a father, and a lecturer, I always partake in family and social positions having their *erga* (cf. 1097b11). Aristotle thus suggests that it would be extremely unlikely if a being that is virtually surrounded by *erga*, products, would not have a product on its own.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *PA* 639b19–21 might be a place where the term “function” works smoothly.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Broadie (1991. 34) for this criticism. Nevertheless, the analogies with bodily parts and crafts might play a certain role. None of them is a perfectly fitting analogy, but each of them has different reasons for not working entirely, which might be important in understanding the concept of *ergon*. An important aspect that would deserve an entire study on its own is the fact that both *technai* and *merei* have their *erga* in relation to a broader, complex entity: the *polis* and the living body. The same seems to hold in the case of human beings as well, namely, *ergon* of a man makes sense in relation to a broader complex entity of the *polis*, cf. Aristotle, *Pol.* I.2, 1253a33–35.

<sup>9</sup> Clark (1972. 272) points out that according to Aristotle the organs have functions (*erga*) only in relation to a given whole or as parts of this whole, cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* VII.10, 1035b23.

At this point Aristotle seems to suppose that the case for a human *ergon* has been made sufficiently. The only specification of *ergon within this passage* is that it is something “own” or “peculiar” (*idion*) to the entity whose *ergon* it is (1097b34). We learn more from the *Eudemian Ethics* II.1 where Aristotle discusses *ergon* in the same context,<sup>10</sup> and a brief look into this text might help in understanding why Aristotle thinks it is not necessary to argue for the existence of human *ergon*:

Let this be assumed; and about excellence (ἀρετῆς), that it is the best disposition, state or capacity of anything that has some employment or function (τις χρῆσις ἢ ἔργον). This is evident from induction (ἐπαγωγῆς): in all case this is what we suppose. For example, a cloak has an excellence – and a certain function and employment also; and the best state of the cloak is its excellence. Similarly too with a boat, a house, and other things. So the same is true also of the soul; for there is something which is its function. (EE II.1, 1218b37–1219a5, transl. Woods).<sup>11</sup>

*Ergon* is described in two ways (*dichós*). It is either distinct from the employment (*chrésis*) as a house is a product of house-building, or in some cases the employment itself is the product (*hé chrésis ergon*) as it is in the case of sight or mathematical knowledge (EE II.1, 1219a13–17).<sup>12</sup> The text of *EE* continues:

For example, a shoe is the product of the art of shoe-making and the activity of shoe-making. So if there is some excellence which is the excellence (ἀρετῆ) of shoe-making and of a good (σπουδαίου) shoe-maker, their product is a good shoe. (EE II.1, 1219a20–23; transl. Woods, slightly adapted)

From the usage of *ergon* in *NE* and *EE* it can be safely assumed that Aristotle employs the same concept of relation between *areté* and *ergon* which Plato introduces in the end of the first book of the *Republic*. There Thrasymachus refuses to participate in the discussion and leaves the reasoning solely to Socrates himself. His first attempt to investigate “whether just people also live better and are happier than unjust ones” (*Resp.* I, 352d2–4, transl. Grube, rev. Reeve) soon turns to the discussion of *ergon*. The *ergon* of an entity is described as “that which one can do only with it or best with it” (352e3) and a bit later in the text as what the given entity “alone can do or what it does better than anything else”

<sup>10</sup> See Hutchinson (1986) for a detailed interpretation of the *ergon* argument in the *Eudemian Ethics* II.1 as well as for the justification of interpreting it together with *NE*.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the closing chapter of the *Meteorology* IV.12, 390a10–13: “What a thing is is always determined by its function (*ergon*): a thing really is itself when it can perform its function; an eye, for instance, when it can see.” (transl. Webster)

<sup>12</sup> This is one of the passages which questions the translation of *ergon* as “function” since a house is hardly a function in any sense of the word.

(353a10–11). According to Socrates a virtue (*aretê*) is a quality by which one performs one's *ergon* well (353c6–7).<sup>13</sup> Aristotle shares the basic scheme that *ergon* is something own or peculiar (*idion*) to an entity and we correctly talk about an excellence or virtue of this entity if it performs its *ergon* well. Therefore, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 Aristotle can suppose that the listeners (or readers) are familiar with this concept of *ergon* within the ethical discussions and does not need to argue for it in the first place.

When asked about the *ergon* of a human being as such (not a man *qua* shoemaker or father), one could answer that this *ergon* must be one's life. Aristotle proceeds in this way, but narrows the possible answers down to a practical life of an entity possessing reason (*praktikê tis tou logon echontos*, 1098a3–4) since neither vegetative life nor life based on perception is *idion* to a human being, but they are shared with plants and animals (1097b33–1098a3).<sup>14</sup> Possession of reason is expressed in two ways: as obedience to reason (*epipeithes logôi*), and as actually having reason and thinking (*echon kai dianoooumenon*, 1098a4–5). Therefore in defining human *ergon*, one has to consider the activity (*energeia*) since it is more valuable than passive obedience.

This focus on *energeia* manifests itself in the wordings of human *ergon* by Aristotle. The first version is the conclusion of the reflections on different forms of life sketched above: “the product of human being is activity (*energeia*) of the soul according to reason or not without reason.”<sup>15</sup> The soul is the subject since it is what makes one alive (*EE* II.1, 1219a23–25; cf. *DA* II.1, 412a27–29) and it is the *eidos* of a living being (*DA* II.1, 412b10 ff.), therefore it can be said that human *ergon* is an activity of one's soul, since the soul is the *eidos* of man. The second wording of human *ergon* employs the notion of *praxis* which reflects the discussion about the particular doings of a kitharist. The kind of life Aristotle looks for can be summarised as “an activity of soul and doings accompanied with reason.”<sup>16</sup> A virtuous man is the one who does this well, in accordance with the concept of *ergon* sketched above, and thus leads a good life.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle supports this conclusion by an analogy: the *ergon* of a kitharist is to play, the virtuous kitharist plays well, similarly, if the *ergon* of human being is the life described above, the virtuous man lives this life in a good and beautiful manner 1729b64278 (*eu*

<sup>13</sup> For the usage of *ergon* later in the *Republic* see Santas (2006). Several interpreters confirm Aristotle's inspiration in Plato's *Republic* as well, e.g. Barney (2008. 315 ff.), Hutchinson (1986. 46–48).

<sup>14</sup> In the *Politics* I.2 1253a8–1253a18 Aristotle lists further characteristics which are *idion* to man: articulated speech (*logos*) and sense of good and bad which allows him to live in societies or communities. These characteristics do not threaten the coherence of *ergon* argument in *NE* I.7 since they are both derived from the fact that man is endowed with reason.

<sup>15</sup> *NE* I.7, 1098a7–8: ἐστὶν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου.

<sup>16</sup> *NE* I.7, 1098a13–14: ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν καὶ πράξεις μετὰ λόγου.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 507b–c for a similarly shaped argument in favor of a just life.

*kai kalós*, 1098a14–15). The description of this human good then uses the term *areté* already: “human good is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue.”<sup>18</sup> This is the case since Aristotle accepts Plato’s concept from the *Republic* I that we do well by the virtue or because of the virtue.<sup>19</sup>

Human good was defined (*perigraphó*) but it is still only sketched (*hupotupóō*), so that we have a clearer conception of what Aristotle talks about, and he proceeds to describe it (*anagrafó*) in more details (1098a20–22). This description then fills the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and climaxes in book ten, where Aristotle mentions again that human good, *eudaimonia*, is “an activity in accordance with virtue” (*kat’ aretén energeia*, 1177a12 ). The best activity we are capable of is contemplation (*theória*, 1177a18). So Aristotle returns to the activity of reason which he mentioned in book one during the argumentation about *ergon* (1098a4–5 compare with 1177a13–17), and declares that *eudaimonia* is *theória* (1178b32). This conclusion should not surprise us since *theória* as the highest form of activity of a wise man (or of a reason of a wise man) satisfies all the conditions Aristotle sets for human good in book one. A wise person is the most self-sufficient one (*autarkestatos*, 1177b1, cf. 1097b6–11 ), contemplation is demanded for its own sake and does not have any other goal (1177b4 ff, 1177b19–21, cf. 1097a32–4), and therefore can be considered more complete (*teleion*) than life consisting in other doings (1178b1 ff.).<sup>20</sup> Finally, it is the activity of reason that satisfies the condition of being peculiar or one’s own at the highest level:

And each of us would seem actually to be this (sc. reason),<sup>21</sup> given that each is his authoritative and better element; it would be strange thing, then if one chose not one’s own life but that of something else. Again, what was said before will fit with the present case too: what belongs to each kind of creature is best and most pleasant for each;<sup>22</sup> for man, then, the life in accordance with intelligence is so too, given that man is this most of all. This life, then, will be happiest. (1178a2–8; transl. Rowe)

The life of contemplation thus satisfies all the conditions of *eudaimonia* which Aristotle mentions earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *NE* I.7, 1098a16–17: τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια γίνεται κατ’ ἀρετήν.

<sup>19</sup> See the dative ἀρετῇ in Plato, *Resp.* I, 353c6 which suggests that we accomplish something by means of the virtue.

<sup>20</sup> Curzer (1990) argues that the criteria for happiness in *NE* I.7 differ from *NE* X.6–8. His text clarifies several important points, but overall it rests on too elaborate and not absolutely convincing interpretations.

<sup>21</sup> The term *nous* has to be supplied from 1177b30. Meanwhile it is referred to as “the strongest among the things in us” (1177b34).

<sup>22</sup> This important part of the argument was mentioned earlier in book nine (1169b33) and it comes from Plato’s *Republic* IX, 585d–e and 586d; Adam (1963), vol. II, p. 358 points out this dependence.

<sup>23</sup> What remains an open question is the relation between the life based on moral (and social) virtues on the one hand, and contemplative life based on intellectual virtues on the

## 2. OBJECTIONS

I tried to present Aristotle's notion of *to ergon tou anthropou* as convincingly as possible. Now I will turn to three objections against this conception of constructing human *eudaimonia* as a final goal of life based on human *ergon*. The chosen objections occur repeatedly in modern interpretations and their proponents consider them so crucial as to undermine Aristotle's position. According to the first objection, the *ergon* argument is useless within the overall argumentative structure of the *NE* since Aristotle actually depicts not one but two morally satisfying lives: the life of moral virtues described in the central books of *NE* and the contemplative life sketched in book ten. Since in *NE* X.7–8 Aristotle clearly argues for the superiority of contemplative life, the *ergon* argument plays only a minor role in introducing the moral virtues and Aristotle leaves it aside in the crucial and concluding book X.<sup>24</sup>

The second objection runs as follows: even if one admits that the *ergon* argument is coherent with conclusions in *NE* X.7–8, the *ergon* Aristotle states as fitting for man does not satisfy his own conditions for being *ergon* since (a) it is not unique (*idion*) – not only men, but also and foremost the gods contemplate and enjoy the activity of reason.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, (b) there are many other activities or doings peculiar to human beings which Aristotle does not suggest and does not discuss.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the third objection claims that the good of a human being does not have to be a good *for* a human being.<sup>27</sup> Namely, if justice is an excellence or virtue of human character, it characterises a good life of a human being. However, a just man might suffer because of his own justice. In the same way, sharpness is a good or virtue of a knife, but it is hard to see how it is good for a knife.

## 3. THE FIRST REPLY

Is it indeed the case that Aristotle uses the *ergon* argument solely in order to arrive at describing moral life based on the so-called moral virtues (*éthiké areté*)<sup>28</sup> and leaves it behind in book ten? Or to put it another way, is Aristotle guilty of introducing *theória* as *eudaimonia* in book ten despite and against the methodology and argument in the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*? The possible answer

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other hand. However, this question demands another substantial investigation, for the current state of debate, see the summary in Dahl (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Roche (1988. 183). This objection is entertained in Korsgaard (1986. 260) as well.

<sup>25</sup> Kraut (1979).

<sup>26</sup> Broadie (1991. 36); Whiting (1988. 36–38); Williams (1972. 59).

<sup>27</sup> Wilkes (1980).

<sup>28</sup> On *éthiké areté* cf. *NE* II.1 1103a14, II.9 1109a20, VI.2 1139a22; VI.12 1144a7.



has two parts. First, I will show that Aristotle does not leave the *ergon* argument behind and the conclusion within book ten corresponds to the principles laid out within the *ergon* argument in book one. Second, it can be demonstrated that Aristotle reflects on the relation between contemplative and practical life in the middle books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a way which helps us in understanding the relation between moral virtues and contemplative virtues.

Indeed, it is the case that the term *ergon* is missing from the crucial chapters on the contemplative life (X.7–8), however, it plays an important role in Aristotle's discussion of pleasure in chapter five of book ten. Aristotle uses an example of different *erga* in order to support his thesis that "activity's own pleasure (*oikeia hedonē*) contributes to increasing the activity" (1175a30–31). Each man takes pleasure doing his own *ergon* rather than the *ergon* of anyone else; each one gets better in his own activity due to pleasure he finds in it, and this pleasure is said to "increase" (*sunauxanō*) this activity as something which is own to it (1175a31–b1). This argument then leads Aristotle to a general conclusion that: "each kind of creature seems to have its own kind of pleasure, just as it has its own *ergon*, for the pleasure corresponding to its activity will be its own" (1176a3–5).

Moreover, Aristotle refers to this thesis that each one gets most pleasure from doing what is his or her own in the conclusion concerning the contemplative life as the happiest life. Once again, let me quote:

Again, what was said before will fit with the present case too: what belongs to each kind of creature is best and most pleasant for each; for man, then, the life in accordance with intelligence is so too, given that man is this most of all. This life, then, will be happiest. (1178a4–8).

The reference is to chapter five interpreted above. The quoted passage suggests that contemplative life is the *ergon* of a human being.<sup>29</sup> This is the answer to the question of what sort of life satisfies the description of "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue (and if there are more virtue than one, in accordance with the best and the most complete)" (1098a16–18).

Second, this interpretation is supported by Aristotle's own reflection on the relation between the contemplative life on the one hand, and the so-called life of moral virtues on the other hand. Within the discussion of intellectual virtues in book six, Aristotle compares *phronēsis* (reasonableness) and *sophia* (wisdom) on two occasions (1141a18–22, 1143b33–35). These comparisons have the same results: wisdom is above reasonableness since its objects belong to the greatest and most valuable ones within the cosmos (*tón timiōtatón*, 1141a19–20), and wise people (*sophoi*) have knowledge concerning *archai* (1141a18). Moreover, wisdom

<sup>29</sup> Of course much depends on the understanding of life (*bios*), see Keyt (1989) for one possible interpretation.



is said to rule over and command reasonableness since it either creates reasonableness itself or supplies it with material to work on.<sup>30</sup>

Aristotle claims that despite this comparison, both virtues, *phronésis* and *sophia*, are desirable by themselves since they each belong to a different part of the soul (1144a1–3). This means that both satisfy an important condition for making up *eudaimonia* (cf. 1097a32–4), and they cannot be substituted. Aristotle then describes what these virtues do (*poiein*). He proceeds through all four parts of the soul which he distinguished earlier in *NE* I.12 and VI.2,<sup>31</sup> and lists what they do (except the fourth, vegetative part since it cannot be said doing or not doing anything at all). Aristotle explicitly states that wisdom produces *eudaimonia* in the soul (1144a4–5).<sup>32</sup> *Phronésis* and moral virtues contribute to fulfilling the *ergon* of man: virtue is responsible for having the right goal (*skopos*) and reasonableness for the right means leading to it (1144a7–9). Therefore, contemplative life seems unquestionably higher than life of moral virtues; however, these virtues and reasonableness are necessary though not sufficient components of *eudaimonia* since without them one could not fulfil one's own *ergon*.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The sentence runs as follows: πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ἄτοπον ἂν εἶναι δόξειεν, εἰ χείρων τῆς σοφίας οὐσα κυριωτέρα αὐτῆς ἔσται· ἡ γὰρ ποιούσα ἄρχει καὶ ἐπιτάττει περὶ ἕκαστον (1143b33–35). The explicative *gar* clause is puzzling and translators do not agree on its meaning. Crisp translates it as “In addition, given that a productive science does govern each product and issue commands about it, it will seem odd if practical wisdom, which is inferior to wisdom, is to be put in control of it.” This is the only occurrence of the term “productive science” in Crisp’s translation. He uses “productive” for *poiētiké* (e.g. 1139a28, b1, 1140a4) and “science” for *epistémé* (e.g. 1094a26, b4–5). Therefore the phrase “productive science” should stand for something like *poiētiké epistémé* which does not occur anywhere in *NE* (moreover, none of the terms occurs in proximity to this passage; for *poiētiké epistémé* see *EE* 1216b11ff., *Met.* 1025b25ff., 1064a17ff.). Brown Ross renders it as “Besides this, it would be thought strange if practical wisdom, being inferior to philosophic wisdom, is to be put in authority over it, as seems to be implied by the fact that the art which produces anything rules and issues commands about that thing.” This translation seems much better, yet it is unclear why it includes “the art” in the translation of the second clause. Rowe’s translation: “In addition to these problems, it would be strange if wisdom (*phronésis*) turned out to be inferior to intellectual accomplishment (*sophia*), yet be more authoritative – as it apparently will be, for the one that brings the other about will be in control and prescribe on everything.” Stewart (1892) vol. 2, 97 reads the clause so that *sophia* supplies material for *phronésis*.

<sup>31</sup> The contextual division of the soul in *NE* seems to be based on three bipartitions; first, two parts are distinguished in the soul: reasonless one (*alogon*) and reason-having one (*logon echon*) at 1102a28. The former one is further divided into the vegetative part and a part that shares in reason or at least it can obey it (1102b11 ff.). The reason-having one is then separated again into two parts; once at I.13, 1103a1 ff. and this division is confirmed and elaborated at VI.2 1139a4 ff. One subsection of the reason-having part deals with necessary objects and connections, the other with all the entities that undergo change, generation and corruption.

<sup>32</sup> It is said that *sophia* produces *eudaimonia* not as a physician produces health but as health produces good state in the body; Stewart (1894) vol. 2, p. 98 comments extensively on the analogy with health and its implications.

<sup>33</sup> Compare *NE* X.7 1177a27ff. on *autarkeia* in relation to intellectual and moral virtues.

## 4. THE SECOND REPLY

The second objection had two parts. According to the latter, Aristotle neglects various specific doings of man. This can be answered with some help from his explicitly stated methodology.<sup>34</sup> When Williams criticises Aristotle's interpretation since it arbitrarily chooses one peculiar doing of man without discussing other options, he writes:

If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time as possible in making fire; or developing peculiarly human physical characteristics; or having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature; or killing things for fun. (Williams 1972. 59)<sup>35</sup>

Let us accept that these characteristics are peculiar to man and they do not depend upon the fact of our rationality. Nonetheless, Aristotle has a fairly reasonable reply: all these suggestions are absurd and unconvincing as an ethical ideal. This is enough to reject them from a serious inquiry. When Aristotle reflects upon his methodology in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he makes it clear that he is not obliged to go through all logically possible options. First, the study of ethics does not allow the same degree of precision as, for example, mathematics or metaphysics (1094b19–27). Second, and more importantly, it only takes most of the credible opinions (*endoxa*), and the most important ones (*ta pleista kai kuriótata*, 1145b2–7) into consideration.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Aristotle is not obliged in examining all peculiarities of a human being. Anyone suggesting, for example, making fire as a human *ergon* to ground human *eudaimonia* should first sincerely experience a life based on such an *ergon* before making this claim.

The variety of different peculiarities of a human being does not threaten Aristotle's argument. But what about the fact that on the one hand, he claims that *ergon* must be something *idion* (1097b34) and then identifies *eudaimonia* with *theória* (1178b32) which is rather a life for gods than humans (1178b25 ff.)?<sup>37</sup> Aristotle uses the term *idion* in order to reject the plain fact of living (*zén*) as human *ergon* since it is common to everything alive including plants, further, he also excludes the life based on sensation since it is common to all animals (1097b33–1098a3). Therefore, when looking for human *ergon* that is *idion*, he ends up with a complex form of “practical life of an entity that possesses reason” (*praktiké tis*

<sup>34</sup> Extremely useful article is Barnes (1980).

<sup>35</sup> Broadie (1991. 36) lists different characteristics but her argument is the same one.

<sup>36</sup> Compare Aristotle's position in *EE*, I,3 1214b28–1215a3.

<sup>37</sup> See Kraut (1979) and (1989), chap. 6.1. On the term *theória* see extremely useful Roochnik (2009).

*tou logon echontos*, 1098a3–4). This complex form of life is indeed *idion* to a human being since gods relate to contemplation (*theória*) in a different way and their form of life cannot be called practical (*praktikê*) because it is not based on any doing (*praxis*). Aristotle considers contemplation as one possible kind of human doing<sup>38</sup> and nothing human can last in its activity without interruption (1175a4–5). On the other hand, gods do not do anything since no doing (*praxis*) can be worthy of them (1178b17–18). The gods are active in the sense of *energeia* not *praxis* and their activity is contemplation.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the god is this *energeia* and therefore he is constantly happy.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, the *ergon* that is *idion* to human beings demands *phronêsis*, reasonableness, in order to be achieved (1144a7–9) since it includes doings (*praxeis*); it is, after all “an activity of soul and doings accompanied with reason”.<sup>41</sup> If we remain satisfied with moral virtues, Aristotle says, we live the second best life (1178a9–14) since *eudaimonia* consists in *theória* (1178b32). But whereas the god’s life is blessed in its entirety, our life only in so far as there is some similarity with the god’s activity (*energeia*). To put it into a nutshell, while for us contemplation is something we do (time to time), for the god it is what it actually is.<sup>42</sup> Human beings can only be similar to god since in the moments of *theória* they share in the same *energeia* that constitutes the essence of god. Within these (perhaps rare) moments we, humans, are god-like but our life nevertheless essentially differs from god’s mode of existence.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.3 1325b16–21: “Yet it is not necessary, as some suppose, for a life of action to involve relations with other people, nor are those thoughts alone active which we engage in for the sake of action’s consequences; the study and thought that are their own ends and are engaged in for their own sake are much more so. For to do or act well is the end, so that action of a sort is the end too” (transl. Reeve).

<sup>39</sup> NE X.8 1178b21–22: ὥστε ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνέργεια, μακαριότητι διαφέρουσα, θεωρητικὴ ἂν εἴη. Aristotle never mentions *praxis* in relation to the god or gods; he consistently uses *energeia*. Cf. Grant (1885), vol. 1, p. 236.

<sup>40</sup> On god as *energeia* see *Met.* XII.7, 1072b26–28: καὶ ζωὴ δέ γε ὑπάρχει· ἡ γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωὴ, ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἡ ἐνέργεια· ἐνέργεια δὲ ἡ καθ’ αὐτὴν ἐκείνου ζωὴ ἀρίστη καὶ αἰδιός. Few lines earlier it says that god’s *energeia* is his *hêdonê* as well (ἡδονὴ ἡ ἐνέργεια τούτου, *Met.* XII.7 1072b16) and in NE IX.4 1166a21–23 Aristotle says that god has the good solely in virtue of what god is (ἔχει γὰρ καὶ νῦν ὁ θεὸς τὰγαθὸν ἀλλ’ ὧν ὃ τι ποτ’ ἐστίν).

<sup>41</sup> NE I.7, 1098a13–14: ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν καὶ πράξεις μετὰ λόγου.

<sup>42</sup> Wilkes (1980. 345) writes “the gods do nothing else,” this is not correct, the gods do not do anything, they *are* the *energeia* of contemplation.

## 5. THE THIRD REPLY

I have suggested possible answers to two objections, according to the third one, the good of a human being that is determined by the *ergon* argument does not have to be a good *for* a human being.<sup>43</sup> The *ergon* argument established that the good of a human being consists in “human good is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue” (1098a16–17). Now we ask whether it is the case that these virtues are good *for* this human being. It is a crucial question since it exposes Aristotle’s ethical theory to an amoralist challenge.<sup>44</sup> The question is not only whether a corrupt society can threaten *eudaimonia* of a just and moral person since it is unclear whether one can gain any moral virtues while living in a corrupt society in the first place (1179b31 ff.). This question aims at justification of Aristotle’s morality to someone who does not accept its basic premises. When talking about the human good (*anthrópinos agathos*, *NE* 1094b7, 1098a7, 1102a14, 1140b5 atd.), Aristotle presupposes that the good of man is at the same time good for man since nothing that is not his own can be good for him. Yet, what can Aristotle answer if someone questions this very assumption?

Aristotle could proceed in two steps. The first attempt might be to appeal to a naturally hedonistic point of view since no one would disprove that pleasure coming from one’s own doing is good for a human being (not the highest good, of course, but simple good since we enjoy it). Aristotle might introduce his basic principle that what is one’s own is enjoyable in itself (1169b33). And pleasure is essentially connected with activity (*energeia*) it makes complete:

For the activity’s own pleasure contributes to increasing the activity. It is those who are active and take pleasure in it that are more discriminating and precise in relation to a given subject, e.g. those who delight in geometry are the ones that become expert in geometry, and are always more able to see things, and similarly the lover of music, or of buildings, or whatever it may be – each gets better at his own task through taking pleasure in it; but what contributes to increasing something belongs to it as its own. (1175a29–36; transl. Rowe)

When applied to a human being that is foremost *nous*, reason (1169a2–3, 1178a2, 1178a7), the result is that human being not only reaches *eudaimonia* when contemplating, but it brings him the highest pleasure as well.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> This challenge actually mirrors Glaucon’s problem with justice in the second book of Plato’s *Republic*, 360d–361d.

<sup>44</sup> On the amoralist, see Williams (1972. 3–13); Williams (1985. 22–29) and Raz (2002), chap. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *NE* 1175a19–21: “As for whether we choose living because we want pleasure or pleasure because we want to be alive, this is something that may be set aside for the present;

What if this answer to an amoralist fails since either he rejects the relation between pleasure and activity or he disapproves of Aristotle's principle linking what is one's own with pleasure and *eudaimonia*? Aristotle considers both the relation between pleasure and activity on the one hand, and the principle that what is one's own is highly pleasurable on the other hand, as basic principles derived from experience (cf. his argumentation at 1104b3ff., 1169b30ff., and X.4-5 from which I quoted above). The only possible answer to someone who denies so basic principles seems to be: go and try. That is why in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that sufficient experience in doings of life (*tón kata ton bion praxeón*) is a necessary precondition for a reasonable discourse on moral philosophy (1095a1–13). And he is even more explicit in the *Eudemian Ethics*: “only the opinions of reasonable men should be examined; it would be strange to present argument to those who need not argument, but experience (*pathous*)” (*EE*, 1215a2–3; transl. Woods).<sup>46</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

I offered a defense of Aristotle's *ergon* argument in the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics* from three objections to its coherence and integrity within the overall argumentative structure of the *NE*. In my reading the *ergon* argument plays a crucial role in Aristotle's moral theory since it allows him to model his theory of virtue upon a much broader (and common-sense) notion of excellence as being good within one's own *ergon*. The result might be frustrating for many interpreters since Aristotle argues for a life of contemplation as providing *eudaimonia*. However, I argued that the moral virtues and reasonableness constitute a necessary part of a fully human life; it is this complexity of human life (with contemplation as its climax) that best satisfies human *ergon*. Aristotle's approach is humanistic in the sense that his moral theory rests upon what it means to live a human life. Nevertheless, it is not humanistic in the sense that human beings are not the most (or even the only) valuable entities in the universe. According to Aristotle: “in fact there are other things that have a far diviner nature than a human being” (1141a34–b1). This seems to be the reason why Aristotle cannot be satisfied with a merely mortal, human way of life as an ethical goal.

Further, if we take the *ergon* argument seriously (both in Plato and Aristotle), it shows how different this kind of ethics is compared to its modern counterparts influenced by Hume and Kant. The move from describing human life based on

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for the two things appear to be yoked together, and not to allow themselves to be separated” (transl. Rowe).

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle in the *Politics* uses the same approach towards those who are mistaken concerning the importance of virtue: “We, however, will say to them that it is easy to reach a reliable conclusion on these matters even from the facts themselves.” (*Polit.* VII.1, 1323a38–40).

human *eidos* leads us to the excellence and notion of *good* human life in a way that shows the Humean distinction between descriptive and normative to be completely anachronistic in this respect.<sup>47</sup> Surely, it is the case that the term *eidos* is “already normative” in certain contexts (especially in ethics). Moreover, one might have problems with accepting that human nature shares in divine or, to put it differently, that there is a bit of divine in us. However, these aspects of Aristotle’s moral theory do not threaten the main aim of the argument that is still interesting and important: to achieve an account of human virtue and good life based on what it means to be a human being.

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<sup>47</sup> Several examples of anachronistic objections are listed in Lawrence (2006. 54).

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